



Shahzia Sikander

ACTS OF BALANCE

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
AT PHILIP MORRIS

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

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Cover and pp. 10–13, 16:

Shahzia Sikander. *Chaman*, 2000 (installation detail).

Acrylic, gouache, ink, and tissue paper, dimensions variable

The Nearness of Difference

DEBRA SINGER

As we step off the elevator into Shahzia Sikander's studio, an overwhelming crowd of images instantly rushes into view. Finger-smudged snapshots, crumpled photocopies, torn magazine pages, open books, and scribbled drawings are strewn across the floor, tabletops, and chairs. Tiptoeing around, careful not to place a hand or foot in an occupied space, certain areas gradually come into focus and hints of order emerge. After all, this is not casual clutter, but a creative thought process laid out in clear view, as exposed and vulnerable as it is restless and defiant.

Looking at Sikander's paintings is like walking into her studio. Filled with vibrant layers of images—from figures, animals, and vegetation to architectural structures, geometric patterns, and abstract forms—her paintings immediately draw you in with a hypnotic pull. It then takes time to sort out their complexity. Her compositions integrate not only aspects of Hindu, Islamic, and Western art, but also elements of popular culture from around the world. These widely divergent sources are suggestively and deliberately combined to create pictorial narratives about reinterpreting past traditions, dealing with cultural transitions, and negotiating issues of identity.

Born in 1969 in Pakistan, Sikander first studied painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore, a city often regarded as the country's artistic capital. Unlike most of her peers, who studied Western styles of twentieth-century art, she concentrated on the extremely labor-intensive and technically demanding ancient tradition of Indian miniature painting. This anachronistic art form originally served to illustrate exquisite royal manuscripts and reached its height of sophistication during the Mughal empire (1526–1857), when Islamic rulers from Persia reigned over

a predominantly Hindu India. Still taught in many art schools in Pakistan, the highly specific methods and rigorous set of rules for producing miniatures have been passed down for centuries. It is only in the last few years that a growing number of younger Pakistani artists like Sikander have started to revive the craft, leading to a noticeable resurgence of miniature paintings.

After several years spent mastering the Indian miniature technique, Sikander moved to the United States in 1992 to attend graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design. Creating art in a country far from Southeast Asia, one where most viewers were unfamiliar with the style, composition, and iconography common to Indian miniatures, Sikander felt free to manipulate traditional conventions and began to introduce other Eastern and Western artistic styles and symbols into her work. Living in America, she explained, also provided her with access to books and information not available in Pakistan about other schools of Southeast Asian painting, particularly Hindu traditions from India.¹ In addition, the physical distance from her own country gave her the chance to reflect on the difficult, psychologically charged relationship between Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. As a result, she started to produce images that addressed differences between Islamic and Hindu aesthetics, while also incorporating influences from her new life in the West.

Sikander's interest in working through aesthetic differences within Southeast Asian art by juxtaposing Islamic and Hindu elements is a particularly significant endeavor given the complicated history between Pakistan and India. Pakistan was created as an independent Muslim state, separate from India, in 1947, when British colonialists relinquished control over the region. Since that time, territorial disputes have intensified the hostility between the two countries. Sikander's embrace of both artistic traditions in her work, however, not only has contemporary resonance,



Shahzia Sikander. *Ready to Leave*. 1997. Vegetable pigment, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea water on paper, 9 7/8 x 7 9/16 in. (25.1 x 19.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 97.83.3

but also a historical precedent. It echoes the Mughal emperors' peacemaking efforts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when they encouraged synthesis of Hindu and Islamic art forms to promote understanding between the two cultures.

The specific ways in which Sikander reworks Indian miniature traditions can be seen in an example from the Whitney Museum's collection, *Ready to Leave*, a small painting on paper measuring only about 10 x 8 inches. The title suggests how the artist has left her homeland behind.

Immediately apparent are the vibrant reds, yellows, and greens common to Hindu traditions, along with the basic composition of an internally framed image surrounded by a wide border that is typical of Persian Islamic miniatures from the Safavid period (1502–1736). The central portrait depicts a young woman at her toilette. The pose is characteristic of a primarily Hindu style of painting called Kangra. This style, which has strongly influenced all of Sikander's work, developed out of the Mughal school and emerged in the Kangra Valley in northern India in the eighteenth century. Kangra painting was, in part, known for depictions of everyday life imbued with a sense of psychological intensity.²

Although the realism of the meticulously executed portrait is in keeping with Mughal traditions, Sikander contrasts this precision with more expressionistic designs evocative of Hindu traditions as well as gestural marks that relate to abstract painting traditions of Western modern art. She then continues to disrupt convention by obstructing our view of the woman's face with a large bluish-gray circle. According to Sikander, the circle denies the viewer access to the woman's identity and blocks the most revered element of a miniature painting, the facial expression. By literally painting over the face, Sikander attempts to repudiate the preciousness of the miniature enterprise.

Sikander also breaks from the past with her handling of the picture's wide borders. In place of the intricate drawings of flowers or animals that would normally fill this area, she presents loosely rendered shapes, patterns, and lines. Moreover, she disregards the normally emphatic separation between border and central image by allowing the forms to move freely around the perimeter of the composition. Among the motifs in this "border" are brightly colored concentric circles. In both Hindu and Islamic cultures, the "circle" is often regarded as a complete, perfect form with spiritual significance. Here they are reminiscent of Hindu *aripanas*, which are part of a folk art custom Sikander first encountered in many villages on a trip through India.

Similar to Tibetan *mandalas*, *aripanas* are sacred circles painted on the ground for certain religious celebrations that symbolize the dwelling of God or abstracted representations of the universe.³ Their appearance in *Ready to Leave* shows how Sikander introduces other traditions, in this instance a symbol from local rituals, into the historically royal art form of the miniature.

Conspicuously positioned on top of the largest *aripana* is a drawing of a black griffin, a mythological beast—half lion, half eagle—whose head is covered by a white, shredded veil. The symbolic griffin first emerged in Greek mythology and then was adapted into local contexts in many parts of India, Western Asia, the Middle East, and Europe where it took on various connotations. Sikander's personal appropriation of the griffin relates both to its reputation as a fleeting creature notoriously hard to track down as well as to its hybrid nature. In the Punjab region of northern Pakistan, Sikander notes, the griffin is called a *chillava*, a term also used to describe a certain kind of personality. In this context, according to Sikander, a *chillava* is

*somebody who is coming and going so fast you can't pin down who they are....The Chillava has multiple identities, and it reflects the sort of rhetoric or categories that I am confronted with. Are you Muslim, Pakistani, artist, painter, Asian, Asian-American, or what? But it is not my agenda to say that I belong to any of these categories....I am interested in hybridity.*⁴

To the artist, the griffin serves as an icon for the mixed and fluid nature of identity and relates to her experiences in the United States, where she has frequently been questioned about her background. Dressed with an unraveling veil, the griffin is also a humorous reference to the persistent stereotype of the veiled Muslim woman in Western culture and represents Sikander's effort to overturn this reductive signifier of Islamic identity.

How Sikander reshapes her relationships to the past is evident in other ways in the recent miniature *Riding the Ridden*. Like *Ready to Leave*, this small painting depicts an internally framed, partially hidden central image surrounded by an elaborate border. A large series of black concentric circles—a form traditionally representing the nine heavens of Islamic cosmology—blocks our view of a silhouetted man and woman in a suggestively romantic encounter. The couple appear as shadowed silhouettes seated on a floral-patterned rug beneath a garden landscape. Both the romantic theme and the stylized rendering of leaves, hills, and lotus flowers are characteristic of Kangra-style painting. Closer inspection of the image reveals that while there are two bodies shown from the waist down, there are actually four upper bodies in the scene. The doubling of the figures' upper bodies is a twist on a miniature convention that signifies movement by repeating the same character in different locations in a single painting.

In *Riding the Ridden*, Sikander again manipulates the border in unusual ways. Flowers from the inner frame spill off the edges and proliferate into red, black, blue, and white dots that migrate across the field. Arranged like sections of a matrix, the dot pattern functions as an important formal device to enhance the effect of parallel, but separate, picture planes existing simultaneously in the painting. The dots also evoke both Eastern Asian and Western references: they are reminiscent of *bindi* dots worn on the foreheads of married women in India, but they also recall Western art's modernist grid and, even more specifically, the signature Benday dots of Roy Lichtenstein's work.

The other prominent motif circulating in the border is cowboy boots, which reflect Sikander's experiences in Texas, where she lived after graduate school.

*When I first arrived in Houston, I was fascinated with the elaborate styles of cowboy boots and thought they were incredibly exotic. They also seemed to be a central part of a specifically "Texan" identity, one distinct from being "American."*⁵



Shahzia Sikander. *Riding the Ridden*, 2000. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared "wasli" paper, 8 x 5 1/8 in. (20.3 x 13.6 cm). Collection of Niva Grill Angel; courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

In the painting, the boots also serve as additional framing devices, containing within them glimpses of other landscapes. Shoes, in general, appear in much of Sikander's work, representing mobility and groundedness. Their multiple meanings refer to Sikander's own transient life, living and working in different cities and countries, which has required her to adapt to many environments.

The elaborate layering of styles and types of images in both *Ready to Leave* and *Riding the Ridden* commingles fragments



Shahzia Sikander. *Elusive Realities #1*, 2000 (one panel of triptych). Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 80 in. (304.8 x 203.2 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

of discrete worlds, discontinuous time frames, and jumbled memories. How we interpret these fragments is contingent on which elements in the paintings we recognize as familiar and which we regard as foreign or unusual. For example, depending on our experience or background, either cowboy boots or veils might seem out of the ordinary. Through carefully considered juxtapositions, Sikander's paintings



Shahzia Sikander. *Elusive Realities*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, triptych, 120 x 240 in. (304.8 x 609.6 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

propose that popular concepts of identity partly grow out of these processes of recognition. At the same time, she also questions the assumptions underlying those social formations.

While Sikander is best known for her small, jewel-like paintings, this new exhibition features recent experiments with scale. The large triptych titled *Elusive Realities* translates both the symbols and compositional devices of her miniatures into a grand format. Each of the three canvases is dominated by a central female figure, around which other designs circulate. Apparent in all of the canvases are elements from Sikander's personal artistic inventory—dots, spirals, and other circular forms, cowboy boots, Islamic geometric tilework, and Kangra foliage—as well as compositional conventions that present architectural spaces alongside garden settings. The three paintings in the triptych depict the same woman in three different yoga-based poses: standing on her head, standing on one leg, and sitting cross-legged with her arms twisted behind her back. According to Sikander, this active, flexible, and strong woman is an icon of self-control and independence. Presented in difficult bodily contortions, the figure also metaphorically alludes to the balancing acts women in







particular face as they juggle the often competing pressures of familial responsibility, career goals, societal expectations, and the desire for personal freedom.

Sikander has also experimented with another highly developed and revered Indian art, that of mural painting. In the installation titled *Chaman*, the Farsi word for garden, Sikander created a contemplative environment by painting the gallery walls from floor to ceiling with bright areas of green, yellow, lavender, and blue intermixed with earthy tones of beige and ocher. These broad expanses of color serve as the backdrop for oversized plants, boots, figures, and architectural structures whose outsized dimensions dwarf the viewer. Layered on top of these paintings are vertical bands of translucent paper that hang loosely down the walls. It is as if the implied overlay of images in Sikander's smaller paintings has been physically realized in material, three-dimensional form. The bands suggest both Islamic painted scrolls and Muslim veils. Indeed, they function like veils—hiding certain areas, exposing others—to create a playful rhythm of emerging and receding images.



These cascading ribbons are painted with simplified, unlabored drawings of swirling geometric patterns and abstract shapes. Their intuitive sensibility contrasts dramatically with the tighter style of painted imagery executed directly on the walls. They possess buoyancy and lightness, as if they were thoughts simply floating in space. Talking about how the tissue drawings contrast with the style of the miniatures, Sikander explained,

I try to keep them spontaneous, gestural. There is a rigor behind them, but they are much more open, democratic. They are not fussy or fetishistic....The tissue drawings are not about the exclusivity associated with skill. They are the opposite.... It is a mark-making process, a journal or diary.⁶

In all her paintings, whether they are small works on paper, large canvases, or expansive wall murals, Sikander puts forth an intricate symbol system that is at once personal, political, and social. Her complex artistic vocabulary tantalizes us with hints of open-ended stories—about travel and displacement, women's independence, contesting identities, and reshaping the past. Rather than encouraging us to draw conclusions, however, her paintings induce us to ask more

questions: How much historical knowledge do we need to understand them? What are the consequences of uprooting culturally specific imagery from local contexts? How do traditions of aesthetics relate to constructions of identity? These are some of the issues Sikander's paintings raise as she examines broad distinctions between Eastern and Western art as well as the heterogeneity within the East itself. Her exploration of this latter phenomenon is one that the theorist Homi Bhabha describes as, "the nearness of difference," a phrase used to acknowledge the diversity inherent in any culture or region.⁷ Sikander's paintings express this concept as she works through distinctions between the closely intertwined cultures of Pakistan and India, and plays with the notion of a Texan identity separate from an American one. As she moves beyond evident international distinctions to more nuanced intracultural ones, Sikander integrates elements from Hindu, Islamic, and Western traditions to create what she calls an "in-between" space where they can coexist.⁸ Her extraordinary array of references are delicately balanced—they neither collapse discrete traditions into one another nor favor certain ones over others. Recalling the unruly site of her studio, this complicated "in-between" space of Sikander's art is paradoxically both fragile and tenacious, reminding us that out of pandemonium the possibility for a new order may emerge.

1. Conversation with the artist, March 2000.

2. Rajaram Narayan Saletore, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Culture* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1981), pp. 674–75.

3. Yves Véquaud, *Women Painters of Mithila* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 28.

4. "Chillava Klatch: Shahzia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha," in *Shahzia Sikander*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, 1998), p. 19.

5. Conversation with the artist, March 2000.

6. "Chillava Klatch," p. 20.

7. Elaine Kim and Margo Machida, eds., *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Contemporary Asian American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

8. Conversation with the artist, April 2000.

Shahzia Sikander

Born in Lahore, Pakistan, 1969

National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan (BFA, 1992)

Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (MFA, 1995)

Lives and works in Houston and New York

SELECTED ONE-ARTIST EXHIBITIONS

1993

Embassy of Pakistan, Washington, D.C.

1996

Project Row Houses, Houston

1997

"A Kind of Slight and Pleasing Dislocation," Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco

"Murals & Miniatures," Deitch Projects, New York

1998

The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

"Drawings and Miniatures," The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art,
Kansas City, Missouri

1999

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1992

"New Artists, Recent Works," Rhotas Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan

1994

"A Selection of Contemporary Paintings from Pakistan," Pacific Asia
Museum, Pasadena, California

"An Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan," Cartwright Hall,
Lister Park, Bradford, England

1996

"Core 1996 Exhibition," Glassell School of Art, Museum of
Fine Arts, Houston

1997

"Selections Spring '97," The Drawing Center, New York

"1997 Biennial Exhibition," Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York

"Three Great Walls," Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

"Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora," Queens
Museum of Art, Flushing, New York

1998

"Liberating Tradition," Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College,
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

"Pop Surrealism," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield,
Connecticut

"Global Vision: New Art from the '90s," Part 2, Deste Foundation,
Center for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece

"On the Wall: Selections from The Drawing Center," Forum for
Contemporary Art, St. Louis

"Cinco continentes y una ciudad: Salón internacional de pintura,"
Museo de la Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico City

"Hedge: Between Time and Intent," Thomas Healy, New York

1999

"Negotiating Small Truths," Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University
of Texas at Austin

"Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art,"
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia

Part II, 1950–2000, of "The American Century: Art & Culture 1900–2000,"
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

"Art-Worlds in Dialogue," Museum Ludwig, Cologne



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